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In Their Shoes

Sam Seidemann

Science fiction novels have the reputation of producing thought provoking ideas, especially in the area of social issues. A novel by renowned sci-fi writer Robert A. Heinlein entitled Farnham's Freehold is no exception. This controversial novel deals with a group of people who, through a quirk of fate, are catapulted two thousand years forward as a result of a powerful nuclear blast. As the group emerges from their shelter, they soon discover that the world has changed in more ways than one. Now, in this new era, Caucasians are the race that is subjugated while the descendants of Africa constitute the "privileged" race. Consequently, the overall tone of the book deals with an issue that is as old as history itself: racism.

Before reading this novel, I was the typical Caucasian, middle-class teenager (Circa 1974), who shared the prevalent attitude that the oppressed minorities had no right to complain and that their perceived lower social status was mostly a result of their own doing. However, this novel changed much of that type of thinking. I soon realized how I might feel if roles were reversed. The resulting conclusion caused much inner-consternation and soul-searching. The final analysis revealed that in order to understand a conflicting point of view, I should put myself "in their shoes" and try to look at a situation through the other person's eyes. This book helped me to transform my biased outlook to that of empathy and understanding.

I must admit that I still unconsciously harbor pre-conceived notions about other people, even though I try not to. Unfortunately, that seems to be a part of human nature. But with novels like Farnham's Freehold, coupled with efforts from all parts of society, perhaps that last inner bastion of bias will disappear. In addition, this enhanced outlook has had the added benefit of positively affecting my social interaction skills with people of the entire spectrum of humanity. These skills are essential in order to survive in contemporary society.